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**Pattern of conferences**

# Pattern of conferences

# Reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

## Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/59/159) and on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/59/172). The Committee also had before it for information the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the integration of global management of conference services (A/59/133 and Corr.1). During its consideration of the reports, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarifications.

2. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/250 of 23 December 2003, the report on the pattern of conferences presents statistical and other information on the utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities, documentation and publication-related matters, translation and interpretation matters and information technology; and the report on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management focuses on general aspects of the technical secretariat support and conference services provided by the Department as well as on the three major projects that it has undertaken over the past year.

3. Issues pertaining to documentation management are discussed in the report on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/59/172, paras. 18 and 19). As indicated in the report, the Department has adopted measures to improve, inter alia, the timely issuance of documents for the deliberations of intergovernmental and expert bodies. These include the implementation of the slotting system for documentation forecasting and planning. The Committee exchanged views with managers of the Department on the status of the implementation of the envisaged electronic documentation management system (ibid., paras. 24-37). The slotting system was established to enhance predictability

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of workload, to enable better planning and utilization of the processing capacity of the Department and to promote more timely issuance of documents through more accurate programming and monitoring of manuscript submissions by author departments (ibid., para. 25). **The Committee is of the view that, in spite of the advantages initially foreseen in the implementation of the slotting system, chronic problems continue, due, at least in part, to "off schedule" submission of documentation for processing. The Committee's experience shows that the system lacks the needed flexibility and has become an obstacle to the timely issuance of required documents as well as the ability to respond to surge requirements. The Committee understands that an interdepartmental review group is being set up to address weaknesses in the system and ways and means to correct them.**

4. The report on the pattern of conferences contains tables with statistical data on the planned and actual utilization of conferences resources allocated to a core sample of bodies that met in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2003, compiled in accordance with the methodology adopted by the Committee on Conferences at its 348th meeting, on 18 May 1993 (A/59/159, annex I). An explanation of the column headings of the tables, including the formula for the calculation of the "utilization factor", which explains changes in the methodology for calculating the factor in 2003, is also contained in the annex.

5. The Advisory Committee notes that according to the formula, the overall utilization factor for 2003 is higher than in 2002 and 2001, reflecting a general increase in utilization of conference resources at all duty stations since 2001. **The Committee welcomes this development but remains concerned about the fact that raw statistics on the utilization of conference resources, without a more qualitative analysis, are potentially misleading and may obscure the understanding of actual efficiency gains in the utilization of allocated conference resources. The Committee believes that, under the results-based management culture gradually evolving in the Organization, more emphasis should be placed on the optimal use of allocated conference resources by measuring results achieved with the use of available resources. As this may not necessarily coincide with the current formula used to measure the utilization of conference resources, the Committee urges all the parties concerned to revisit the methodology for calculating the use of conference resources taking its views into account.**

6. The report on the pattern of conferences also addresses the issue of vacancy rates in language service posts (A/59/159, paras. 47-49). At Headquarters, several translation services continue to have high vacancy rates as a result of a large number of retirements and other staff movements. In Geneva and Vienna the vacancy rates are lower, although they are expected to increase as a result of retirements falling between now and the end of 2005, and in Nairobi difficulties remain in filling translation, editorial and interpretation posts (ibid., para. 47). The Committee was informed that the problem is more acute in the filling of Arabic language posts. **The Committee is of the view that greater attention should be paid by the Department to succession planning by identifying potentially successful applicants in local markets and developing a roster of qualified candidates in all official languages. The Committee intends to revert to the general issue of succession planning and vacancies in the context of its review of the**

**documentation submitted by the Secretary-General on human resources management to the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly.**

7. Major projects undertaken by the Department, as mandated by the General Assembly (see resolutions 56/242, 57/283 B and 58/250), include the study on workload standards and performance measurement (see A/59/172, paras. 48-52). The Committee notes that a task force on workload standards and performance measurement was established in July 2003 with the participation of United Nations Headquarters, and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. The task force has reviewed the existing workload standards for conference-servicing staff and tried to establish the impact of the introduction and utilization of various new technologies and working methods on the performance of staff in the conference-servicing area (ibid., para. 48). **The Committee notes that in certain areas of work such as text-processing and distribution, the introduction of information technology tools has resulted in efficiency gains, reflected in staff reductions and redeployment, and that the efforts of the Department to establish total e-flow and e-processing of documentation are still at an early stage (ibid., paras. 50 and 51). The Committee points out, however, that the introduction of new information technologies in the Department has not automatically resulted in increased productivity in important areas of work such as editing, translation and interpretation, where the nature of the work may not be readily amenable to automation and the ultimate impact of such technology is difficult to assess.**

8. In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes from the report of the Board of Auditors on the financial reports and audited financial statements of the United Nations for the biennium ended 31 December 2003 (A/59/5, vol. I, chap. II, para. 191) that the Board was informed by the Department that factors affecting the decline in output and productivity in the Department included the introduction and spread of e-flow and e-processing, involving the expanded use by translators of keyboarding and computer-based terminology and reference aids. The Committee points out that these have actually lowered productivity although they may eventually enhance the quality and consistency of the final product. **Nevertheless, the Committee is concerned that after a large investment in information technology (IT) in the Department, measurable gains in productivity and quality are yet to be realized. The Committee requests that, in its ongoing reform efforts, the Department continue to develop a coherent and practical results-oriented IT strategy. In so doing, it should ensure that the needs and experience of language staff are taken fully into account in the further development and use of IT in the department.**

9. The Advisory Committee notes from the report of the Department that it will continue the study of workload standards and performance measurement, with a view to presenting to the General Assembly, at its sixtieth session, a proposal for a comprehensive methodology for performance measurement and management for a full-system perspective (A/59/172, para. 65). **From its exchange of views with managers of the Department, the Committee is not convinced that the Department has made sufficient efforts to raise the performance of individual staff members by, inter alia, linking its staff training programmes with its workload standards and performance measurement. The Committee requests that the Department report on the matter in the context of its report on the study of workload standards and performance measurement.**